The Definitive Guide to Travelling in Indonesia

Everything you need to know when you're visiting Indonesia
TravelLocal is bringing the ‘buy local’ movement to the travel industry. The company specialises in bespoke travel itineraries, created with local experts around the world. This involves connecting travellers with handpicked local experts, ensuring quality and local knowledge. It’s a great way to support the local economies of the places you visit and have a better trip!
Our local partner based in Indonesia

“We offer tailor-made holiday experiences, exploring the many cultures and landscapes of Indonesia. Our mission is to create a bridge between travellers and local Indonesian people, increase environmental awareness and, above all, to plan incredible Indonesia trips!”

You need a real, local connection to appreciate Indonesia, or you’ll get lost in its vastness. Our local partner was founded in 2002 by Danny and Jacqueline (an Indonesian-Dutch couple) to bring the complexity and beauty of this amazing country to life for visitors from around the world. Their team of 14 local experts don’t do “cookie-cutter” or “follow-the-flag” - they want you to avoid the crowds and enjoy a tailor-made holiday experience. Their passion is to show you the real Indonesia - local people and customs, off the beaten track villages and stunning wildlife encounters. In the last few years they have welcomed more than 6,000 visitors to Indonesia. Like all companies on TravelLocal, they are locally-owned.

★★★★★
Indonesia trip - went like clockwork
- Ian from Windsor
Travelled to Indonesia in March 2018

★★★★★
Really fantastic interesting trip
- Jill from Devon, UK
Travelled to Indonesia in November 2017

★★★★★
Nice people and great nature in Indonesia
- Samo from Slovenia
Travelled to Indonesia in July 2017
11 ... Lombok and the Gili Islands
12 ... Bali
13 ... Wildlife Encounters
14 ... Jakarta
15 ... Temples
16 ... Toraja Culture of Sulawesi
17 ... Underwater Action
18 ... Cultural Cities
19 ... Great Beaches

20 ... Get started on making your dream trip
Indonesia defies any attempt to generalise. The sheer vastness of this archipelago is mind bending enough, but when you factor in the huge number of islands, the multi-ethnic population and the sheer diversity of cultures, Indonesia inspires a kind of astonished awe. And so it should.

A key attraction of this supersized country is its diversity. Home to towering volcanoes, sprawling forests and pristine beaches, there’s no shortage of wonderful landscapes and ecosystems to explore. You could come face to face with a dragon, scale a mountain, immerse yourself in a cultural display or simply relax on a white sand beach. Your hosts may have modern city lives or instead maintain the ancient traditions of their rural ancestors. Indeed, your trip to Indonesia can take whatever form you wish and that’s what makes it so utterly unique: the possibilities are endless.
Indonesia’s population is huge and growing, ranked fourth in the world in 2016 with nearly 260 million people. As many as 300 distinct ethnic groups, speaking more than 700 languages and dialects, make up the heritage of Indonesia’s population and Java is the country’s most populous island.

Indonesian people are required to adhere to one of six official religions. These are Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Atheism is not illegal but is not socially acceptable or recognised by the state. Islam is by far the dominant religion in Indonesia, with almost 90% of the population identifying as Muslim.

Located on the border of two tectonic plates, Indonesia has a landscape which has to be seen to be believed. Alongside countless mountains and over 400 volcanoes, of which 150 are active, the vast archipelago boasts pristine beaches and sprawling rainforests. It also forms a section of the Pacific ‘ring of fire’, a geologically active area which encircles much of the Pacific Ocean.

Tourism in Indonesia is an important contributor to GDP, and the authorities are keen to develop the sector further. The highest percentage of tourist arrivals to Indonesia come from Singapore and Malaysia. The current government has targeted several areas for rapid development, one of them being Batam; chosen for its proximity to both Malaysia and Singapore. Visa restrictions are being increasingly relaxed in a bid to encourage more international visitors and more and more Indonesians are travelling extensively within the archipelago.
FOOD AND DRINK

Indonesian cuisine has much in common with other Southeast Asian fare, and reflects the food available locally as well as echoes of various influences including European, Middle Eastern, Indian, and Chinese. Vibrant flavours, rich colours and tantalising aromas are everywhere, from upscale Indonesian restaurants to street food carts.

Staple foods include rice, noodles, fish, meat, spices, coconut products and vegetables. Although few generalisations apply, there are some universal dishes you can find pretty much anywhere. These include sambal, a spicy sauce made from chillis; satay, skewered meat, grilled and smothered in a spicy peanut sauce; gado-gado, a tofu and egg salad with assorted vegetables; and nasi goreng - the de facto national dish - a concoction of fried rice, a sweet-savory sauce, and pickled veg.

In terms of regional specialities, our local experts recommend richly spiced rendang from West Sumatra, soto banjar from Banjarmasin and nasi tumpeng from rural Java, although there are countless delicacies for you to try.

Beverage-wise, coffee was introduced to Indonesia in the 17th century, and the Indonesian people took to it quickly. Caffeine has become an intrinsic part of the day and there is a strong local coffee culture, now complemented by the usual international chains in the bigger cities and malls. Indonesians take their coffee brewed in the cup with lots of sugar. This method means that you will need to let it brew for a few minutes while the grounds settle to the bottom. Tea is also produced in Indonesia - it’s the sixth largest producer globally - and is a very popular drink, though the rituals surrounding tea vary considerably throughout the land. Most Indonesians take their tea black and sweet, and in some areas other flavours are added such as jasmine, ginger or lemongrass.

For the most part, alcohol is easy to come by in Indonesia. The national beers, Bintang and Angker, are a widely available option, easily found in most restaurants and hotels. Both brews are a refreshing and enjoyable lager style beer.
CLIMATE

Dotted along the equator, Indonesia boasts a tropical climate with year-round warm temperatures. Altitude brings the temperatures down slightly, but in general you can expect a range of around 20-30 degrees Celsius. As this is a country of such immense size many of the islands have their own microclimates. The Central Mollucas region for instance is influenced by winds from Australia meaning that the wet season falls between May and late September, completely unlike the rest of the country. Despite these anomalies, it is possible to offer a broad overview. The heaviest rain tends to fall between November and April and the rest of the year is generally dry and sunny, although storms are frequent. Regardless of weather patterns busy times to travel in Indonesia include July to September and the Christmas period, as well as important national or religious holidays.

CURRENCY

At the time of writing, £1 buys just under 17,000 Indonesian Rupiah (Rp); $1 is worth 13,300 Rp and €1 just over 15,000 Rp. The Indonesian Rupiah is prone to fluctuations and is rarely stocked by banks outside Indonesia. You will be able to get hold of some currency once you arrive in Indonesia either at a bank, an ATM or a moneychanger. Most decent sized towns have ATMs and banks willing to change US dollars. However, the notes need to be in good condition and not older than 2010 otherwise the exchange rate drops drastically.

LANGUAGE

The multitude of Indonesian languages is frankly mind boggling, but most Indonesians speak Bahasa Indonesia as well as their regional tongue. Bahasa Indonesia is used as the language of instruction in schools and colleges, plus it is used by national media and officialdom, so it has become a kind of lingua franca which unifies the whole population. It is also quite easy to pick up a few words and phrases as the grammar is relatively simple.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

As of June 2015, visa on arrival costs have been lifted for visitors from many countries around the world. Most airports are now visa free providing that you are staying for a maximum of 30 days and your passport is valid for 6 months from your date of arrival. However, free visas cannot be extended so if you intend to stay for longer you must purchase a paid visa which costs $35 and can be bought on arrival. Be sure to check latest requirements before you travel.
Centres well known for artistry in Indonesia include Ubud in Bali, and Yogyakarta in Java, where you can experience traditional Indonesian music in the form of a gamelan orchestra, often accompanied by accomplished performance artists who showcase the fine art of Indonesian dance. There are many local variations on these classic Indonesian arts, just as there is a huge and exciting calendar of festivals. These range from humble village events to the huge 2 day national celebration of Idul Fitri which marks the end of Ramadan.
THE HIGHLIGHTS

Lombok and the Gili Islands
Bali
Wildlife Encounters
Jakarta
Temples

Toraja Culture of Sulawesi
Underwater Action
Cultural Cities
Great Beaches
Lounging to the east of Bali, between the Bali sea and the Indian Ocean, lies Lombok; a quieter island of fishing villages and paradise beaches. It offers a quintessential Indonesian scene: sprawling paddy fields, white-sand shorelines and the looming peak of Rinjani, one of the highest volcanoes in Indonesia. Apart from peaceful days at the beach, Lombok has many other attractions and among them is scaling the volcano that dominates the island. At 3,726 metres it’s quite an imposing sight, visible from most parts of Bali and Lombok, and it’s easy to see how the people who live here have imbued this mountain with spiritual significance. The south west peninsular of Lombok is another special place, relatively undeveloped yet ringed with divine beaches and excellent diving sites. The Gili islands are another draw for visitors who are looking for something a little more tranquil than busy Bali. Three tiny islands just off the north west coast of Lombok, each boasting gorgeous beaches and a laid back mood. More and more visitors are making their way to the Gili islands but they still feel small and enjoyable. For total seclusion however, look elsewhere as the Gili Islands are no longer the secret they once were.
For non-beach activities, Bali still has plenty to offer. Ubud is a real hub of Balinese culture and, although its popularity is growing by the day, it is still the heart of the island’s artistic scene. The streets are awash with galleries, studios and theatres, all surrounded by some of the most delightful scenery on the island. The iconic rice terraces and greenery are seemingly endless and offer an easy way to escape the average tourist crowd. As well as strolling the rice terraces there are other unmissable treks on Bali, notably the ascent of Gunung Batur and Gunung Agung, two of Bali’s volcanic peaks. Both offer amazing views and an interesting perspective on the island overall, but note that Gunung Agung is a very tough hike.

Indonesia’s most popular island, and the only stop for many visitors, beautiful Bali is becoming busier by the day. However, despite its popularity, the island still boasts many secret hideaways and is well worth a visit. The majority of people come to Bali for its beaches and there is no shortage of lovely shorelines, most with dark volcanic sand. Many of the beaches are great for surfing, busy Kuta Beach is ideal for beginners, and some of the best breaks in the country are found along Bali’s south coast. Surfboards aside, the whole island is pretty much surrounded by reefs which are ripe for exploration by divers and snorkelers.
Wildlife encounters

Once widespread throughout Southeast Asia, wild orangutans are now limited to only two small geographical areas. One is Borneo, the other is Sumatra. Orangutans live exclusively in the trees, hence the name orangutan which means ‘people of the forest’. Sumatran orangutans are a little smaller than their cousins in Borneo, and Gunung Leuser National Park in Northern Sumatra is one of the best places to see them. As well as orangutans, the park also hosts rhinoceros, elephants and elusive populations of Sumatran tiger. This is a slice of some of the most complete and untouched forest ecosystems in the region, and is still far from the average tourist itinerary.

Bukit Lawang, on the other hand, is a kind of natural resort where plenty of visitors come to spot the orangutans and other wildlife. It is pleasant and fun, but can get very busy, especially at weekends. Komodo dragons are another of Indonesia's best known species. These formidable beasts are found on the Indonesian islands of Komodo, Flores, Rinca and Padar. The Komodo National Park covers much of these islands and brings in lots of visitors eager to catch sight of one of the world's most ancient reptiles. Their population density is highest on Rinca, but there are very few visitors to Komodo who do not manage to see a dragon during their time there.

1 Gunung Leuser National Park
2 Bukit Lawang
3 Komodo National Park
The capital of Indonesia is a metropolis of more than ten million people. Its daunting jumble of high rise blocks and traffic interchanges quickly mellows once you get your bearings and scratch the surface of this cultural hub. The city is a magnet for Indonesians looking for secure work and, as such, it has drawn people from all over the land. Different ethnicities, religions and cultures all meet on the streets of Jakarta and this diversity has made the city a beacon of tolerance and a great place to find fusion cuisine. Indeed, the restaurant scene is the most diverse in the country and it’s a real highlight of Jakarta. As well as feasting at countless restaurants and street food outlets, there are plenty of other diversions to fill your time. The old town - once called Batavia and now known as Kota - is evocative of the colonial Dutch era with its cobbled streets and charming buildings. It’s a good area for street theatre and musicians, and there are plenty of tempting venues to stop for a coffee or a snack.

There is a clutch of worthwhile museums in the city, too, including the Jakarta History Museum with a wealth of displays relating to Indonesia’s prehistory, colonial era and more recent development. The Bank Mandiri Museum is a potted history of banking in Asia and, although it may sound dry, it showcases an intriguing array of historic banking paraphernalia such as money counting machines and primitive calculators. The National Museum of Indonesia has a wonderful collection of Hindu and Buddhist art, gathered from Bali, Borneo, Sumatra and Java, which is displayed with creativity and flair.
The temples of Java are particularly well known for their elaborate and beautiful designs, especially considering the centuries of life that have drifted past their ancient stone walls. Borobudur is renowned as the largest Buddhist temple in the world, and it’s also the top tourist draw in Java. Constructed over 1000 years ago from more than 1,600,000 blocks of volcanic rock, it is now one of the most revered and holy sites in the country. Nearby Prambanan plain is another important site in Java, where a number of ruined temples and palaces dating from around the ninth century AD dot the landscape. Both sites can be reached by car from the city of Yogyakarta and the journey time is around three hours. The oldest Hindu temples in Indonesia can also be found in the vicinity of Yogyakarta on the once-sacred Dieng plateau, a strange and otherworldly volcanic caldera; still hissing with escaping gas and scattered with sulphurous pools. Outside of Java, there are still other temple hotspots to be found. Bali is peppered with idyllically sited, multi-roofed temples which are perhaps the most iconic images of this dreamy island. Tanah Lot, rising up from a rocky offshore outcrop, is almost entirely surrounded by the sea, giving it a special aura of peace and solitude. The lofty stupa and watery setting of Ulun Danu Beratan temple inspires calm contemplation on the shore of Beratan lake in the central Balinese highlands. Meanwhile, the Besakih temple complex in eastern Bali is another fabulously scenic ensemble, with a fairytale roofline and a wonderfully evocative setting.
One of the most enthralling indigenous cultures of Indonesia is that of the Toraja people of South Sulawesi. Tana Toraja is a lush region of green hills, fertile soil and plentiful buffalo, dotted with distinctive stilted houses called tongkonan. Animist beliefs were the mainstay of the Toraja until Dutch missionaries began to convert them to Christianity in the early 20th century. One of the most interesting aspects of the Toraja culture is the tradition of keeping deceased loved ones at home for months, sometimes even years, before burial. Funerals in Toraja society are incredibly important. The size and extravagance of a funeral is a reflection of the deceased’s standing in the community, and it is important that as many far flung family members as possible are brought back and accommodated for the week-long farewell. Therefore, the person who has passed away will stay with the family while preparations are made. Food is offered to the corpse daily, and family members and visitors will stop by to pass the time of day with the dearly departed. Then, when all preparations are in place, feasts are ready to be cooked, and best party clothes are donned, the funeral will begin. These funeral ceremonies are commonly open to onlookers and can be a fascinating insight into a wholly different approach to living. A life here is almost a preparation for the grand event of death, a refreshing and confronting viewpoint for many westerners!
Raja Ampat archipelago is one of those 'heaven on earth' places that has to be seen to be believed. Hummocks of rock sprouting verdant jungle and skirts of white sand emerge from electric blue lagoons, all simply waiting to be explored. Above sea level you can hike on some of the larger islands to search for birds of paradise, or look for colourful geckos, lizards and snakes.

However, the islands of Raja Ampat are more famous for their submarine life, which is pristine and thriving, and for the sheer diversity of its coral reefs. Dive outfits are present on most of the larger islands, with several dedicated dive resorts in operation. Favourite dive sites include Sardine Reef and Manta Sandy, where manta rays are commonly in residence. Snorkellers will enjoy the shallows where bright fish, crustaceans and coral are amazingly vibrant and beautiful. When you tire of the marine life, our local experts recommend exploring the rural appeal of the area through local cycle tours, cookery workshops and wildlife spotting trips by kayak. It’s a stunning natural setting with plenty to keep you occupied for a week or more. The best time to visit if you intend to dive is November to March when the waters are calmer and clearer.
Many Indonesians would consider Yogyakarta, which sits in the south of Java’s central region, as the traditional and cultural heart of the nation. It is a city of royal origins which showcases many of the finest palaces and temples in the land. The past is all pervasive as you take a stroll among historic homes, fine museums and plentiful artistic outlets such as galleries, boutiques and workshops. This is the hub of Indonesia’s artistic heritage and it’s a great city to shop for souvenirs such as metalwork, carvings, batik and hand painted canvases.

The Sultan’s Palace and the National Museum are two standout sights within the city, while there are also famous temples in the vicinity. (See chapter on temples.) Theatres run regular performances of traditional shadow puppetry, gamelan orchestras and the renowned Ramayana ballet. Besides Yogyakarta, Ubud is considered one of the country’s cultural capitals. This Balinese hub is alive with dance and artisan crafts and is also a great base for forays into the delightful hill country surrounding it. Here, numerous Hindu temples and shrines adorn the already pretty landscape; their intricate carvings demonstrating the ancient spiritual significance that the area has always held. Overall, it is a place to understand the Balinese soul and find a peaceful retreat of your own in the surrounding landscape.
Great beaches

Among the thousands of Indonesian beaches, there are many standouts. The white sands of Lombok and the Gili islands are detailed earlier, and these - along with Bali’s volcanic beaches - are some of the most famous and accessible of Indonesia’s beaches. However, head a little more off the beaten track and you will likely be rewarded with a gleaming white beach all to yourself.

Kei Islands

The Kei islands over in the far east of Indonesia near west Papua are great for island hopping and offer the chance to explore gorgeous coves and bays, all accessorised with rustling palms and turquoise waves. Likewise, the Banda archipelago, where not only are the beaches exquisite but the diving is world class too. Take a look at our local experts’ ‘Ultimate Undiscovered Islands’ itinerary idea for further inspiration.

Java and Sumatra

Some of the bigger and more populous islands such as Java and Sumatra have their fair share of great beaches too, for example the Karimunjawa archipelago just north of Jepara on mainland Java has a string of beautiful white sand beaches which see more local visitors than foreigners and retain a secluded and tranquil feeling. There are reefs for snorkelers and a few low key resorts, all of which are just a 3 hour boat ride from Java. Pangandaran beach in western Java is the surfer’s choice, but is also popular with beachgoers and underwater enthusiasts. The islands offshore from Bungus bay near Padang in central Sumatra are another collection of idyllic hideaways where the soothing tropical colours, heavenly beaches and enticing marine life are just a short hop by boat from the main island.
Wondering where to go in Indonesia? Our local experts are able to design bespoke itineraries, showing visitors the best of their country. If you want to get off the beaten track and see the real highlights of Indonesia, why not see what ideas they come up with for your trip? Just pop a few details into our enquiry form and they will work their magic.
"We have just booked our third trip with Travel Local and it won’t be our last! Excellent service and attention to detail, and great value for money."

Rachel, UK

"Experts in authentic experience"

Elaine, Brazil

“Knowing that local businesses will benefit whilst still having the security of booking and paying through an ABTA company was wonderful”

Lesley, Australia